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MOVING FROM PRINT TO ELECTRONIC JOURNALS: A STUDY OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN INDIANA

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ABSTRACT

Two decades ago when electronic journals were first being considered by libraries, many librarians wondered if it was a format that would take off and be accepted by patrons. Not only did e-journals succeed, their astronomical rise in use was accompanied by a dramatic decrease in the use of print journals. For many libraries one question that continues to be discussed is whether maintaining redundant print journal subscriptions is sustainable or necessary. Some of the factors evaluated by libraries are the costs of maintaining current and archival print subscriptions as well as the level of confidence in having perpetual access to electronic holdings. Drawing on a study of over seventy academic libraries in Indiana, this paper will examine the reasons why, in general, we are seeing academic libraries make an ongoing shift toward electronic journals and away from print journals. Using data collected from a survey as well as interviews with library administrators, the decision-making process at college and university libraries in Indiana is described. The libraries in the study are at both private and public colleges and universities whose enrollments range from under 1,000 to ARL research institutions with enrollments of over 50,000.

BACKGROUND

In the 1990's when e-journals were just gaining a foothold in libraries, there were many doubts of the desirability of the format – was it really what patrons wanted. The technology was not robust which caused concern on all fronts – by librarians, by administrators, by technology folks. There was a lot to be cautious about. However, technology improved over the years, patrons and faculty came to embrace the format especially as it became more user-friendly and e-journals became accessible from anywhere anytime – the so-called “library without walls.” We can see in hindsight that the shift from print to electronic was inevitable.

THE STUDY

For this research, my study group was member libraries of the consortium, *Academic Libraries of Indiana*. There are 73 member libraries, from private and public institutions. An online survey I conducted received 26 responses for a 36% response rate. To get more in-depth information about current practices, I conducted interviews with library administrators at five private and four public college and university libraries.

Sixty percent of the survey responses were from private colleges and universities, and 40% from public. Enrollments ranged from under 1,000 to over 25,000. Regarding the highest degree offered the majority of responding institutions reported offering the Master's degree.

Regarding total materials budgets, seven libraries (30.4%) report having budgets under \$100,000 while five (21.7%) report materials budgets over \$1 million. There were two questions

on the survey addressing how materials budgets were allocated between print and electronic journals. (Electronic journals could be available as single-title subscriptions, in aggregators, or in publisher packages.) Twelve respondents (54.5%) reported spending under \$50,000 on print subscriptions and three (13.6%) reported expenditures from \$501,000 to \$1 million. Regarding e-journal expenditures, six libraries reported expenditures under \$50,000 and one reported spending over \$1 million. Regarding the number of print subscriptions, 58.3% responded that they subscribe to fewer than 500 titles and one library reported current print subscriptions from 2,001 to 5,000.

DECISION-MAKING: WHO

The two key questions are who is involved in the decision-making regarding cancellation of print journals, and what factors influence those decisions. The responses were consistent in both the survey and the interviews. When asked who is involved in the cancellation of print journals, survey responses indicated a high level of involvement by librarians (90.5%), faculty (52.4%) and library administrators (33.3%). The responses for who are the decision-makers in the cancellation of e-journals parallel those for print cancellations: librarians (95.2%), faculty (57.1%) and library administrators (33.3%).

From the interviews, I learned how much emphasis is placed on the input of faculty, no matter the size of the institution. More than one library administrator emphasized that the faculty can be a great ally when included and a hindrance to change when they are excluded from the decision-making process. They are most familiar with the curricula in their disciplines and therefore crucial stakeholders. Librarians rely on faculty advice about the necessity of maintaining print subscriptions when they are also available online.

Libraries seek the input of faculty in several ways. Many have a librarian-liaison approach, some use librarian/faculty committees, others have discussions at the level of library administrator meeting with the chairs of academic departments. When consensus is reached about possible print cancellations, proposed lists are shared with faculty via the library's website, sending out emails, or posting to a faculty website providing an open communication process. Everyone has the same information, everyone develops an appreciation of the finite budgets of libraries, and everyone is involved in the decision-making.

DECISION-MAKING: WHY

Both the survey and the interviews revealed that the top reasons to cancel print journals are: subscription cost, electronic preferred by students, redundancy, budget cuts, and print used less than electronic. As you can see, financial considerations are pressing. Materials budgets do not always keep up with increases in subscription costs. Of the nine administrators I interviewed, only one had had a budget increase in the past two years. One library reported a 25% cut in their materials budget. The remaining seven either had static budgets or slight decreases. As one administrator said, it isn't that librarians "cancel print because they hate it" but they do it because of the fiscal reality of maintaining dual formats.

It is generally accepted that students prefer electronic over print and consequently print is used less than electronic. It is a common story at many libraries that if there is an access interruption to an e-journal aggregator, students will decline to use print and will instead wait until access is restored to that title. Students are so connected electronically today it is almost anachronistic to expect them to use print.

Regarding the reduced use of print; there are many articles describing how to carry out print use studies. Because usage studies can be time-consuming and labor-intensive, libraries are finding other methods of measuring print use. One administrator interviewed put it simply: "if a print journal is gathering dust, it is a candidate for cancellation." Another said "we do it by instinct." No matter the method, there is agreement that print use has declined precipitously over the past ten years. Electronic resources are an easier and more attractive alternative.

The question about redundancy has been asked since the advent of e-journals. Part of the hesitation to give up print is that there is not total confidence in permanent archival access whereas with print the archival holdings are right there before you, tangible, visible, under your control. The question persists about who can or should be relied on to guarantee permanent archival access. Can the publishers be relied on? There is not universal agreement among librarians that they can. Other alternative archiving services have been developed – LOCKSS, CLOCKSS, Portico, and JSTOR.

Maintaining dual format subscriptions (or, as some authors have called them, "hybrid collections") raises many questions: is it feasible, sustainable, desirable, and supportable to have both print and electronic versions of the same journals? My data reveal that the answer is no. Print collections continue to shrink owing in large part to the number and variety of full-text journal aggregators with their holdings in the thousands of titles. Access to such a volume of information has not yet made print obsolete but it does influence decision-making.